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Hespe Says Quality Will Drive Early Childhood Education Program - State Board Approves New Assistant Commissioner To Oversee Efforts -

Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe today presented a vision for early childhood education to the State Board of Education that emphasizes excellence and will ensure children in Abbott districts are ready to learn the state's new and more challenging core curriculum by the time they enter kindergarten.

At the same time, Hespe named Margretta Reid Fairweather as the department's new Assistant Commissioner of Early Childhood Education. The State Board approved the selection of Ms. Fairweather, who has led the New York State Department of Education's child, family and community services team since 1992.

Ms. Fairweather, as a policy team leader, had responsibility for the implementation of New York State's universal pre-kindergarten program, which is offered by school districts and early childhood providers.

"We are only weeks away from launching a program that will prepare children in disadvantaged communities to compete on an equal playing field with those from wealthier districts," Hespe said. "The scale of this program, and our commitment to its success, is without equal. Not only will we be breaking new ground, we will be laying the foundation for a program that will have positive long-term benefits for our children and our state."

This fall, pursuant to the state Supreme Court's mandate in its 1998 *Abbot v. Burke* ruling, half-day pre-school programs will be available for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Once implementation issues are resolved, full-day programs will be instituted to complement the all-day kindergarten programs that will be provided in all 30 Abbott districts. Implementation issues include the shortage of teachers trained in early childhood education and the number of additional pupils seeking to be enrolled in pre-school programs.

"Quality is the cornerstone of our efforts, but they are also anchored in reality," Hespe noted. "Providing high quality early childhood education is one of the highest priorities of the Whitman administration. The Governor has pledged that every Abbott district child will have access to a full-day preschool program in the next three-to-five years. We have also promised to certify teachers in early childhood programs and to set statewide standards for early childhood education.

"Practical limitations make it impossible to accomplish everything we want immediately. The reality is these improvements must be phased in, but they will be phased in as quickly as they can be without sacrificing quality."

By using existing community-based providers, New Jersey's pre-school program can begin to produce beneficial results for children in the Abbott districts this September. Hespe said the decision recognizes the commitment and value of the staff already providing services to the community and the crucial role of these providers in the community.

To help ensure the facilities are adequate, a \$12 million 'Bright Beginnings' grant program has been created within the Department of Human Services to fund major building and renovation projects at existing child care centers. The Department of Education will also use the five-year facilities plans filed by the districts to assess future school-based needs.

"Like most good public policy, the goal of using community-based providers comes at a price," Hespe said. "Implementation issues are complicated by both the sheer number of providers and the complexity of molding two very different systems together - the public school system with the child care community. But partnerships between the public and private sector can increase quality and efficiency in many areas. Given the short time frame we have for implementation, a flawless transition is not possible. However, I am optimistic we are on the right track."

The commissioner said rapid intervention teams have been formed on a regional basis to assist Abbott districts in implementing their early childhood education programs. The teams have received special training and are familiar with the districts' early childhood plans as well as their contingency plans. They will be ready to assist

districts now through October. Each regional team consists of a county superintendent of schools, a county school business administrator, an external consultant and representatives of the Department of Education, a Program Improvement Regional Center and the Department of Human Services.

Hespe said his decision to create a new Division of Early Childhood Education headed by an assistant commissioner demonstrates his commitment to seeing this program succeed.

In her previous post, Ms. Fairweather developed policy and provided program support and coordination of statewide activities for fostering early childhood education and school-community partnerships.

"I am delighted that Margretta Fairweather has decided to join us as our new assistant commissioner of early childhood education," said Hespe. "We have created this new division to highlight the importance we place on early childhood education for our youngest citizens.

"Research has shown that a high quality early childhood program provides an important foundation for all children as they enter kindergarten. I strongly believe that Margretta Reid Fairweather is the right person to lead us forward in the implementation of this program, which has placed New Jersey among the national leaders in early childhood education."

Ms. Fairweather graduated from the City College of New York in 1970 with a BA in sociology. She received her Masters Degree in Urban and Environmental Studies from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1973 and a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies from the College of Education at the University of Hartford in 1974.

She has worked at the New York State Department of Education as the Director of Student Development and Family Support Services and Administrative Coordinator in the Office for Education of Children with Handicapping Conditions. She also served as the Chief of the Bureau of Comprehensive School Improvement Planning in New York City.

"I am looking forward to leading the development of New Jersey's early childhood education program," said Ms. Fairweather. "I would like to thank Commissioner Hespe for the confidence he has shown in me. My only goal in this position is ensuring a high quality early childhood education program in the state of New Jersey."

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